

STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Stranmillis University College

Submission to the Independent Review of Education

We believe that education can have a transformative power in the lives of children, young people and communities, helping to shape people's lives and their future prosperity. This lies at the heart of our College Mission:

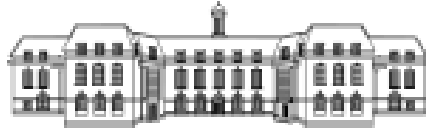
'To transform the lives of children, young people and communities through excellence in teaching, scholarship and research.'

Teacher Education

We recognise that **teacher education**, both initial and career-long, is fundamental to the success of a high-quality education system and any structural or policy changes must prioritise the provision of, and ongoing support for, those who engage with young people during their time in education. While teachers play a critically important role in classrooms, education also takes place before a child begins school and indeed in many ways outside the classroom throughout their learning journey. It is therefore also essential that a high-quality workforce is supported for all aspects of education provision, including from the very earliest years of a child's development. Such vital roles in society must be informed by ongoing high-quality research to ensure that all of our young people receive the highest quality education possible and hence are able to achieve their potential and maximise their life choices.

We are fortunate in Northern Ireland, in contrast to other parts of the United Kingdom, to have an educational system where teaching is still valued, where many young people aspire to education as a career and where high-quality teacher provision has been a hallmark of our system for many years. However this should not be taken for granted and is a result of complex and well-established partnerships across many sectors in Northern Ireland. While teacher education is undoubtedly considered a strength of the education system, it is not without challenges and we must be mindful of the needs, particularly in key areas of post-primary such as STEM and the emerging trend of shortage of teachers in some areas as witnessed during the current pandemic. We have seen in other parts of the UK the challenges of rebuilding teacher professionalism and the long lasting and damaging impact of teacher shortages and the inability to attract high-quality candidates to the teaching profession.

We would therefore urge the panel to ensure that any proposals value and celebrate the high-quality university-based teacher education that exists in Northern Ireland and that quality teacher education remains the foundation of any successful system.



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

Early Years

A second area of focus for the panel should be **Early Years provision** and the need to invest in this sector, including in practitioners who lead in this area. The recent report, A Fair Start, has recommended redirecting the policy focus and prioritising investment in the early years as a key element for addressing underachievement and we would strongly support this vision and again encourage the panel to ensure that Early Years is a key focus of any plans. High-quality research in this area will ensure maximum benefit to those in early years provision.

Educational Underachievement

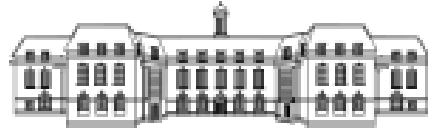
In terms of major issues addressing the Northern Ireland educational system, while it is undoubtedly true that many of our best young people achieve outstanding results we continue to have a significant issue with **underachievement**. The Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement (CREU) at Stranmillis was launched in 2018 with the core aim of engaging in a focused portfolio of innovative interdisciplinary research into educational underachievement in Northern Ireland, nationally and internationally. The Centre seeks to build on many years of innovative teaching and learning, robust research and scholarship, and effective community partnerships by cohering our efforts to address one of the most significant and complex societal challenges facing Northern Ireland. The Centre has published a number of research reviews in this area and the most recent of which, published in 2021 states:

The overall assessment that in Northern Ireland, socio-economic inequalities in education lead to wider disparities in educational achievement based on wealth and class remains unchanged since Gallagher and Smith's report in 2000. Since then, and despite policymakers' repeated calls for progress in this area, only one substantial academic research project (Leitch et al., 2017) has fully focused on educational underachievement.

This research review also emphasises the importance of Early Years interventions saying:

Existing research and government monitoring of educational underachievement using GCSE and A-level attainment data skews our attention to post-primary education. However, there is a need for long-term evaluation of key policy interventions in Early Years introduced with the stated aim of raising attainment for disadvantaged children

Other recent CREU research studies have included a report on the impact of Covid-19 on education and social mobility in Northern Ireland (see [NI chapter](#) for the Social Mobility Commission); the impact of two extended periods of home schooling which found experiences to be socially mediated (see [report](#)); the experiences of parents of children with SEN in mainstream education as they seek support to meet their children's needs (see [report](#) for NICCY); and the recently published '[Beyond the](#)



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

[Stereotype](#) Report which highlighted issues of rural disadvantage, isolation and underachievement (hitherto largely unreported).

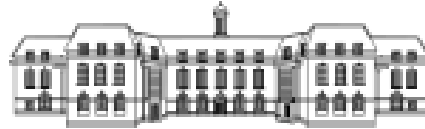
Education System

The New Decade, New Approach Deal recommended the establishment of a panel to review education with a focus on, among other areas, “*the prospects of moving towards a single education system.*” In Strand 3 of the Terms of Reference, the panel has been asked “*to focus on how the education system is currently designed, delivered and administered – to ensure the education system is efficient, sustainable and more streamlined with barriers to effectiveness identified and challenged.*”

There is currently in the educational sphere no consistent or agreed definition of a single education system and, taking an international perspective, successful education systems around the world, while seeking efficiency and effectiveness, also recognise the value of diversity and the need to take account of local situations, parental choice and most importantly, the variety of needs of our young people.

There has been a move in recent years to ensure that pupils' needs are placed at the forefront of education systems and this should remain the driving force for any structural change. While of course efficiencies and value for money are important and limiting factors they should not be the core motivation for structural change. Rather, the question should be how do we further refine our education system, making best use of all our resources, including estate, financial capital and high-quality workforce, to best meet the needs of all our young people and ensure that all achieve their full potential. We would recommend that the panel do not allow the quest for “a single system” to distract from the fundamental purpose of the review and, given the complex and often divisive history of Northern Ireland, it is critical that the focus on reducing underachievement and raising quality is central. Stranmillis greatly values our partnerships across all education sectors in Northern Ireland and would however welcome greater collaboration and partnership as a positive aspect of any successful education system. We would also propose that the goal of a “single system” should be to ensure that all pupils enjoy a consistent high-quality learning experience, rather than each school to be a replica of its neighbour.

We also note with interest that Strand 1 of the Panel's Terms of Reference includes consideration of “*The transition and transfer of children from primary to post-primary*”, and welcome the fact that the Panel is commissioning a short literature review on academic selection. We would however encourage the Panel to seek funding to commission a more substantial piece of original comprehensive and robust research into academic selection in Northern Ireland, given the lack of any



STRANMILLIS UNIVERSITY COLLEGE
A College of Queen's University Belfast

major empirical research on this since Gallagher and Smith's seminal research¹ which is now more than 20 years out of date.

Conclusion

In conclusion we would reiterate the critical importance of teacher education, both initial and career long, as a driver for positive educational outcomes and would urge the panel to recognise the many strengths of teacher education in Northern Ireland and ensure that it is sustained and indeed further strengthened, in any proposals.

We would also ask the panel to ensure the focus remains on addressing underachievement and building systems that give every young person the opportunity to achieve their full potential and to appreciate that this starts with investment in the early years.

Finally we would welcome the opportunity to meet with the panel in due course for an in-depth discussion of this critical review.

¹ <https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/publications/gallagher-and-smith-research-research-papers>